

Immaculata Hall

Story of a building saved by vision, work of two people

Tucked away on a quiet Helena side street in the shadow of the old fire tower, stands Immaculata Hall, a signified building with a long history of service to our community. The story of Immaculata Hall, at 32 South Ewing, is a success story of a building saved by the vision and hard work of two people who come to its rescue in the nick of time.

In 1869, six sisters from Sisters of Charity, a Catholic order, travelled to Helena by stagecoach from Kansas. Their primary mission was to establish schools in the young Montana territory.

Together with Jesuit missionaries, the sisters founded St. Aloysius Select School for Boys and St. Vincent's Academy for Girls that year on a hill overlooking downtown, just south of Broadway. Nearby, the Church of the Sacred Heart and other institutions also sprouted. The site was soon known locally as Catholic Hill.

St. Aloysius School first operated in a crude slab build-

ing. In 1875, that structure was replaced by a larger wood-frame building where classes continued until 1883, when new brick buildings were begun for both St. Aloysius and St. Vincent's schools.

The new St. Aloysius was an imposing, two-story brick building with a bell tower and diamond-shaped transoms. Boy's school was held there until 1910; nursing classes for nearby St. John's Hospital then filled the school. In 1925, St. Aloysius was renovated and rechristened Immaculata Hall.

Ten years later, Helena's famous 1935 earthquake rocked the hill, and Immaculata Hall sustained heavy damage. During ensuing repairs, Immaculata Hall came to look as it still does today. A new west wing doubled the size of the old school, and dormitory rooms for student nurses were added upstairs.

Carroll College ran Immaculata Hall until 1972, after which the building was sold and became home to other programs, including Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation for several years. Finally, in need of repair and unable to attract tenants, it was condemned in 1990 for non-compliance with fire codes.



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The building stood vacant for over a year, and months of vandalism took their toll. Spray painted graffiti, toilets smashed, sinks ripped off walls, doors kicked in - this was the scene which greeted prospective tenants and visitors.

Then in 1992, Immaculata Hall received a new lease on life. Mike Roach and Shauna Thomas, who rented the adjacent laundry building which once served Catholic Hill, purchased both buildings. Appraisals for the neglected school shocked them: the highest and best use identified for Immaculata Hall was demolition followed by new construction.

Convinced that a beautiful historic building was worth far more than a pile of bricks, Mike and Shauna, with the help of friends and family, dedicated the next two years to reviving Immaculata Hall, reopening it wing by wing. From the ground up, they repaired every room and brought the building back up to code. they refurbished the interior top to bottom, cleaned and repaired woodwork, added plush new carpet and painted walls. They pruned the lilacs in the courtyard and planted flowers.

That year, the Helena Community School moved into Immaculata Hall, making it the oldest school still used in Helena. In that proud tradition, this small independent school runs a full elementary school program.

Today, the sounds of children laughing and talking once again fill high ceilinged rooms with big sunny windows. At noon, kids again spill into the courtyard to eat lunch, run and play. And from offices upstairs, Mike and Shauna can look down into the courtyard, to see the results of their handiwork - the spirit of Immaculata Hall alive and well.

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